San Antonio Missions

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Mission Concepcion

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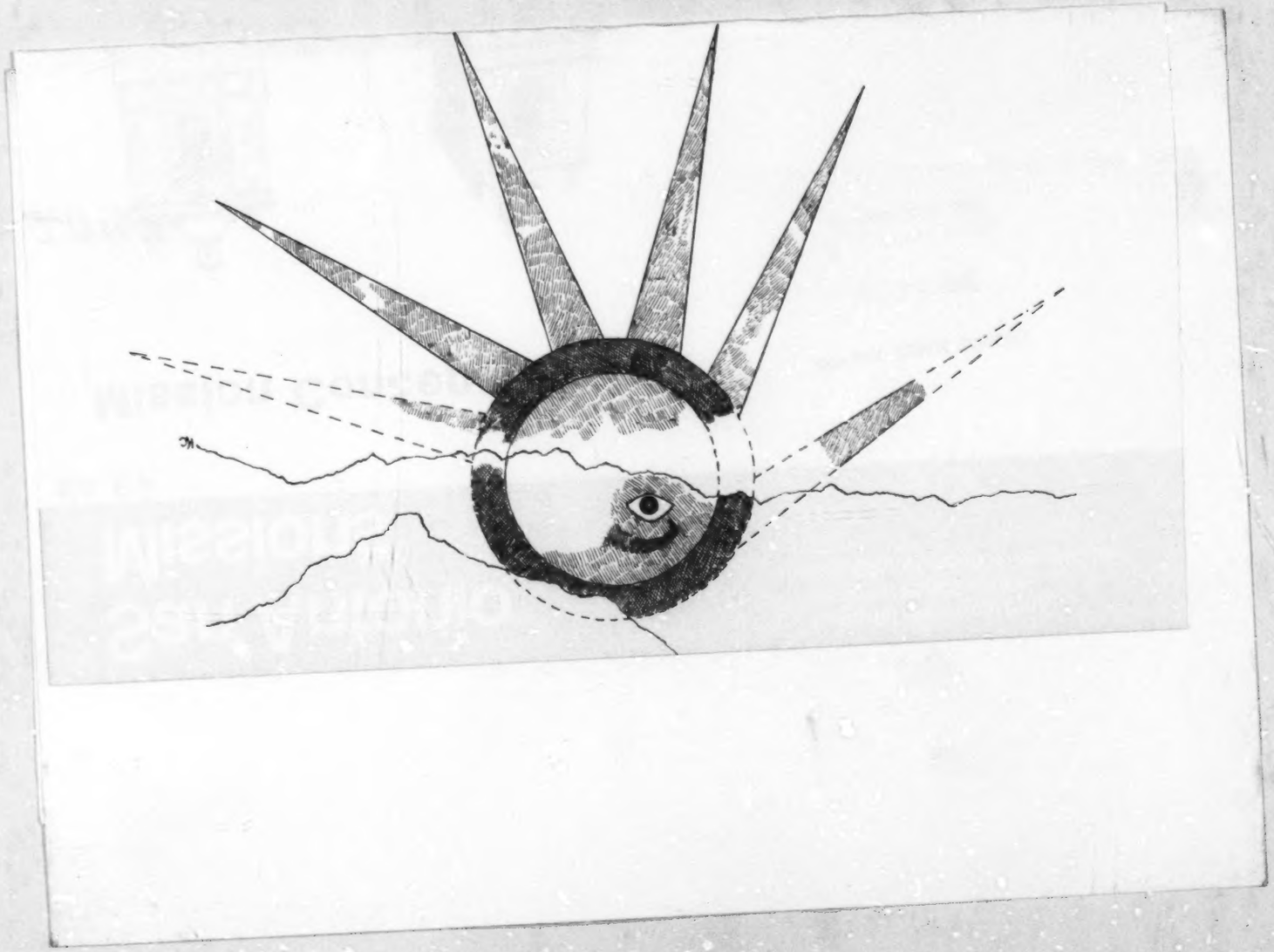

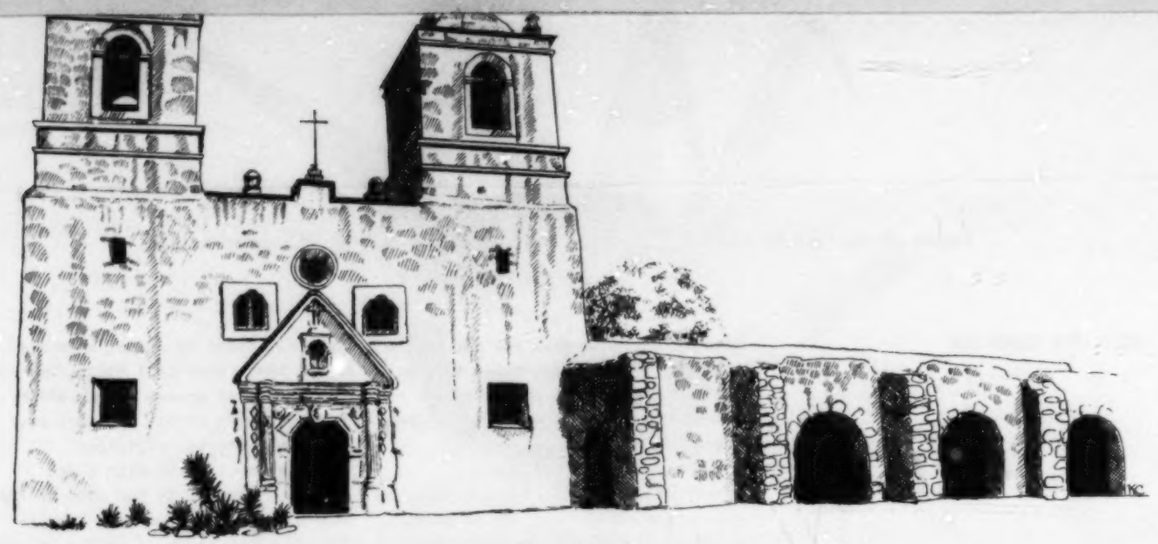

In the early hours of a new day barely visible, light begins to tint the sky in shades of crimson. Cool morning air carries the aroma of breakfast. There are sounds, too: an early rooster crows, a horse whinnies, and one child calls another. One final sound identifies this awakening place, as mission bells ring in the day. It is 1755, and this is the frontier mission of Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción de Acuña.

THE WORK OF A MISSION

All this activity on the banks of the San Antonio River had started about a generation before. In 1731 a handful of Franciscan friars and Spanish soldiers, ordered to relocate their string of missions from some three hundred miles east, had arrived on the banks of the San Antonio River to begin again. Stationed on the northernmost fringes of the Spanish Empire in the New World, their goal was to spread Christianity, vocational education, and European culture among the Indians gathered on this frontier. The Franciscans taught the Indians Spanish, and the skills of farming and ranching. (This was a tremendous change for Indians who had been nomads, hunting game and gathering wild plants.) They taught the Indians to make their own clothing from wool and cotton; to construct buildings of stone; and to operate a blacksmith shop to make their own tools. The mission became a complex of buildings, including stone houses, classrooms, shops, and a granary.

The National Park Service, as a guest invited to the mission by the Archdiocese, welcomes you to lovely and peaceful Mission de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción de Acuña. Bienvenidos - -

Please be careful walking through the building, and don't spoil your visit with a stumble. This is an historic building, protected by law and by the people who love it. Please help us take care of it.

All donations to the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park are greatly appreciated as they will help in the preservation of the missions. All donations are tax deductible and a tax form will be provided upon request.

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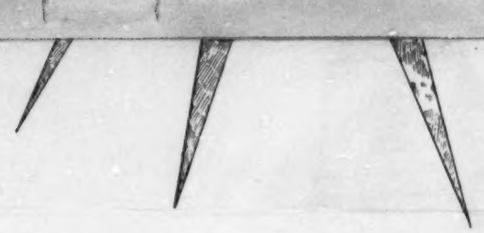

Fresco of the "Eye Of God," a religious symbol, from the ceiling of a convento room.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Amongst all this work for the empire, however, of most importance to the Franciscans was the imparting of Catholic beliefs and practices. This energy became visible as a beautifully decorated, well constructed limestone church began to take shape. They built it on bedrock, which is one reason it exists in reasonably good condition today. It was dedicated on December 8, 1755.

It was no easy task which faced the Franciscan priests, for they were not writing on a blank slate. The Coahuiltecans ("Kwa-weel-tekens") and other tribes who came in to the missions already had religious beliefs. Today we do not know much about their ancestral faith, but they were aware of unseen forces which bear on human lives, and they had numerous mitotes (religious ceremonies) to cope with those forces. However, in the mood of that day to be citizens of the Spanish Empire meant to be Catholic. So along with farming and other crafts, the priests taught the mysteries of the Catholic faith, and the liturgy and ceremonies that expressed them. The great stone church the priests and Indians built together saw worship, training, weddings, funerals, baptisms, confirmations, and festivals.

DECLINE AND REDISCOVERY

The great days of the mission lasted some sixty years, but then came decline. Disease, Apache raids, the removal of state support, and especially the confiscation of all unbranded mission cattle by one of the Spanish governors, devastated Mission Concepcion. During the Texas Revolution the abandoned buildings made a convenient camping ground for Texan and Mexican troops, and again for U.S. troops during the Mexican-American War. In between conflicts local settlers used the church building as a barn.

But the effect of the once-busy mission lived on. The Indians had in fact learned the ways of Spanish culture, which began to surround them as the city of San Antonio grew around the missions. Of all the structures which once existed at Concepcion, only the church remains intact. It may well be the oldest unrestored stone church in the United States. Its influence continues as well. Now it is a parish church, and religious services similar to those the old building saw two centuries ago still take place. Today, under a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the Catholic Archdiocese of San Antonio signed in 1983, Mission Concepcion serves a two-fold purpose for church members and visitors alike. As a church, Concepcion continues to serve the needs of the local parish. As an historical structure and a national treasure, it saves for all of us part of our enriching past. And it lives in another way too. Many local citizens, including the ranger writing this brochure, count in their heritage the blood of the Indians who once gathered along this river.

-Leo Teran, Park Ranger

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